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TABLE APPOINTMENTS.

BY

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We were witnesses, no very long time ago, of a contest between an intelligent artist, and an eminent art-critic. The former had designed a dinner service for a porcelain manufactory, to every piece of which he had sought to give, not exactly a known Grecian shape, but a Grecian type, and with delicate and appropriate ornamentation. We might suppose that such an experiment was quite in the right spirit, not copying, or merely transferring the old shapes, but creating new ones of the same noble character. And indeed the attempt was far from being unsuccessful.

Our critic, however, was not satisfied. Though prepossessed in general in favour of conventional treatment, his idea was that just in this instance classical or quasi-classical forms were ill suited both to purpose and material, and that the free and capricious forms of the Rococo period would have been more appropriate.

Connoisseurs seem to have approved his sentence; for we may observe that collectors are vigorous in their search after old porcelain which however had no earlier origin than the Rococo period, and are happy if they ornament their tables with it, even if their dining rooms, according to the modern fashion, are arranged in the severer style of the Renaissance. The reason may be that modern porcelain is still inferior, and produces much less effect; and it cannot be denied that the impression produced by this old porcelain, notwithstanding the bizarre of its forms and ornamentation, is not without harmony both in itself and with its surroundings.

Porcelain, notwithstanding its brilliant properties, is put aside in favour of another material, less excellent and less solid, namely faience or glazed terracotta, so as almost to be banished from the realm of art. It will therefore be desirable to enter somewhat more deeply into the æsthetic requirements of the table-service. Nothing new may possibly be advanced, but yet something that may tend to enlightenment.

What then are these artistic requirements? Do they really exist, or are they not rather the illusions of an overstrained æstheticism? If we were merely to consult the common taste of the nineteenth century, such an inquiry might indeed be superfluous and useless; for if the material be costly and genuine, the porcelain fine, the other appointments of silver, then the shape and decoration is considered a matter of indifference. As to the latter, it is entirely disregarded, or, and even this is thought a superfluity, a simple rim of gold and crest somewhere introduced. As to art, that is the cook's affair. Let him do his duty and the æsthetic taste is satisfied. This is, or was the general opinion.

Such a standpoint however is now no longer tenable, or only so for one whose eyes are not yet open to the Beautiful, and who therefore is of no authority in any æsthetical question. Now we demand not only the gratification of the palate but of the eye also. The sight of what is beautiful and bright increases our pleasure and adds to our capacity of enjoyment. There may be gourmands, we appeal to the authority of »Punch«, who

courteously beseech their fair neighbour to suspend all conversation until dinner is over; to these not only conversation, but the beauty and art displayed on the table are so many disturbing elements when the dinner is on gastronomical principles. That is the great point. But the same great authority proves that such rare characters are clearly in the wrong, for we have the laughs on our side, and the laughs are right. We take it therefore as indisputable that the table should be artistically appointed, and this depends on the dinner-service. The manufacturer has to satisfy the demand. In the interest of his business he must follow the fashion though he might and frequently does lead it; but how? this is our inquiry; how is the object to be attained, unshackled by any caprice of fashion?

And in the first place, in order to avoid all misunderstandings and superfluous remarks, it must be distinctly understood that the very first and indispensable requirement of a table service is that it should perfectly answer its peculiar purpose; if not, if it does not fulfil its office, or does so with difficulty or discomfort; then however elegant, however classically pure its form may appear, however much art and pains may have been expended upon it, it must be at once rejected. The beautiful and the useful must go hand in hand, must unite in the same object.

This principle brings us at once to a right decision as to the before mentioned point of controversy with regard to the material. Conformity to the end in view is the primary essential point, with the secondary consideration indeed that beauty is to be combined with it, and when rightly treated should be its natural consequence. This conformity depends as much on the material as on the form; for even an appropriate form would be of no use with an inappropriate material. There can therefore be but little difficulty in deciding the now controverted question whether porcelain, or the glazed terracotta usually called faience is the most appropriate for the table. The artistic peculiarities of each are not identical, but of nearly equal value. Porcelain has more delicacy and elegance, faience is stronger and more ornamental though of coarser shape. Practically porcelain, notwithstanding its apparent delicacy, is of greater solidity; it is harder, more uniform in surface and much less endangered by hot water, and easier to clean, whereas in faience the glaze is apt to crack and leave disagreeable and unsightly spots upon it. Hence, porcelain is more particularly adapted for the dinner and tea services, while faience, considered from this point of view should only be employed for such pieces as are intended to hold only what is cold and dry. And since faience, as is shown in the antique and modern majolicas, is in a degree more artistically designed and possesses more decorative advantages, it is easily seen that its province is for ornamental vessels, vases, epergnes, fruit dishes &c.

As a general rule modern faience manufactory has acquiesced in this division, but there are important exceptions, which appear to be in opposition to our assertions. England is celebrated beyond all other nations for her

practical way of proceeding, yet there the ordinary dinner and tea services are of faience and not of porcelain. This is also the case elsewhere, as for example in the North and Northwest of Germany where formerly the Dutch and then the English influence prevailed. And this is easily explained for the simple reason that England possesses no Kaolin and cannot therefore manufacture the genuine hard porcelain. Her rich, tender and vitreous porcelain with its warm creamy tone has, like the old Sevres china, a most charming appearance when rightly and delicately treated, but on the one hand it is too dear and on the other does not possess the solid qualities of the real genuine article. Here are therefore local circumstances which necessitate the use of faience, and every attempt has been made to bring it up, as far as possible to an equality with porcelain. It was so in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Holland and France and is so still. The deficiencies of the faience are in this instance counterbalanced by its being cheaper and easier of attainment.

Modern fashion has also found another motive for attributing a certain preference to faience. It opposes the country to the town as if there were one taste for the one and another for the other. »That is good for the country,« they say, meaning such objects as are of a coarser but still of a more artistic character. But, as we do not become peasants when we are into the country, though the townsman often adopts the jacket and knickerbocker, as the peasant when in town mounts the frock, there is no reason why we should make use of coarser vessels when in the country. We cannot by any means recognise this artistic difference between town and country. If things are good, they are so without as well as within the town. In France too some years ago they began to make a difference between the breakfast and dinner services, using for the former the rudely painted faience which they call country faience; we can only consider this a caprice of fashion void of all rational justification.

This point being settled, let us inquire into the method of decoration without considering whether we have to do with porcelain or faience. There are two points for our consideration; the one regarding the ensemble, the decorative effect of the table, or, as specially regards our subject, of the service, when in itself, or in its harmony with all its surroundings; the other respecting the beauty of the separate pieces in themselves.

As to the first point, namely, the general effect, this is our usual style. We cover the table with a white cloth whose only decoration is white upon white, which is entirely without meaning; we put white napkins upon it and white plates and dishes, usually without any, or with very little ornaments; then we add colourless glass and ivory or silver handled knives, and when all is thus in its place and looks nice and clean the hostess is perfectly satisfied. And yet, æsthetically considered nothing has been done, nay less than nothing. The dining room itself, at least it ought to be so, is decorated with colours on wall and ceiling and carpet, in chairs and

other ornaments which are here brought together, and in the midst of all stands a great broad white blot which takes up half of the entire space. Who would tolerate such a sight if all-thought-destroying custom had not blinded the eye. It is like a lake in some beautiful region, which instead of the living water reflecting sky and forest and mountain and landscape in a thousand varying shades and colours is filled with fresh-slaked lime. The evil is so much the greater as we now make the dining room darker and darker, and the contrast between the white spot and its coloured surrounding is still more aggravated.

Well then, without any doubt, we want colour here. We will not here speak of the tablecloth of which we grant the necessity, but which might be relieved by some colour, we confine ourselves to the service and its accessories. These, we maintain, require colour, in the first place, to be in harmony with the coloured surroundings, and secondly to relieve the tablecloth and give colour to the white table. The white surface must be relieved and enlivened.

We may now easily find several conditions to which this application of colour must be subject or which must limit that application. It is scarcely necessary to say that every kind of significant decoration such as religious or historical figures must be excluded; the decorative art of the present day in obedience to many a warning voice has come back to this sentiment of propriety, and if it seems sometimes to act contrary to it, it is generally in the case of articles which are intended merely for display and not for use. The artist's task is not so much with the decoration itself as with the effect of the decoration. Thus there are certain parts of the vessels which should be entirely without decoration. The interior parts, which are not seen and so cannot produce any effect, need none, and those which have a special destination, which are covered by the viands, should have if any, only an unimportant and purely decorative ornament, and even that very sparingly applied. In plates, for example the border only should be ornamented not the disc. The white surface may in some way be relieved, but to fill it up with a picture can only be excused in a plate which is to form the decoration of a credence. Pictures and plates combined are repugnant to our ideas for daily use. Those

parts or sides of the service should exclusively receive decoration which are always in sight, and serve to enhance the general effect.

We may now return to the point at issue with which we commenced. Ought the table service to be so ornamented as merely to contribute to the general effect, or so that it should at the same time be in itself a perfect pleasing work of art. In this last case the form also is a necessary element, which must not be disregarded, whereas in the former case, where the effect of colour is the great point, the form is of less importance. The old workers in porcelain had this effect of colour especially in view, or at least this is almost the only interesting side which they offer to our consideration. The capricious and irregular forms of the Rococo, departing equally from the round and oval shape, are not adapted to the nature of these table services and therefore are not to be cited as patterns, or in any way worthy of imitation. They may still possess some charm by their capricious, bold and surprising forms, they may be ornamental and pleasing, and in this respect may be in harmony with any elegant material, but this beauty of theirs is always impaired or of an inferior kind. It is the same with the Chinese porcelains with respect to their form. The flower and water vases, teapots and cups of the Japanese and Chinese were the originals of our own, and are even now in general to be preferred to ours in respect to their form. They have at least the freshness of originality, but considered in themselves, they are often clumsy and disagreeable, especially in the larger articles, or heavy and stumpy as in their pots, or stiff and angular without any gracefulness in their contours. For the most part, though there are indeed some exceptions, their only worth consists in their pictorial decoration: this, however bizarre it may at first appear, however realistic in its design, and especially in its figures a mere curiosity to us, has so much of good and wholesome effect in its colours, and is at the same time so full of charm and harmony, that these objects can never be out of place in any artistic disposition, but adapt themselves to all with wonderful harmony. This is why they are sought and valued by connoisseurs in art and are admirably suited for table-services.

(To be concluded in our next.)